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Gulf Shia... The Silence That Was Misunderstood

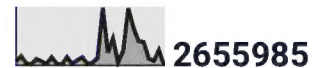
****By: Lamis Dhaif****

Iran or Independence?

A question posed by the UN representative to Bahrainis in 1970 —
and Iran did not like the answer.

If the question were asked today in a different form — Iranian
guardianship or Khalifa rule — what would you choose?

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A question I repeated many times to end heated debates about
"Iranian heroics." The answer will surprise you — as it completely
surprised me.

The world today looks toward Gulf Shia — after Iran's repeated
aggressions against Gulf interests and territories — to know whose
side they stand on, whom they lean toward, and what they harbor
within.

The truth is that Shia in the Gulf are not a monolithic bloc — not in
jurisprudence, not in politics, not even in general sentiment.

In countries like the UAE and Qatar, there is complete integration into
society — you can barely distinguish Shia from others except through

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their surnames or their observance of Ashura alone.

In Oman and Saudi Arabia, they have a crystallized identity and independent presence under the roof of the state — at peace with it and careful not to provoke it.

In Kuwait, Shia have long been classified as allies of the ruling system, with a deeply rooted integration experience and concentrated economic presence. And contrary to Baghdad's expectations, they formed the nucleus of the armed resistance movement against the Iraqi occupation in 1990.

As for Bahrain — the situation is more complex and tense, given the interplay of demography, politics, history, and other factors beyond the scope of this article.

The Soft Theft — How Iran Seized the Sect

Let us be precise:

Historically, Iran was not the center of Shia Islam. The Shia faith only became a state doctrine and hegemony there in the sixteenth century.

Meanwhile, the Najaf Hawza in Iraq was established in the eleventh century — more than 500 years before Iran itself became Shia. Najaf



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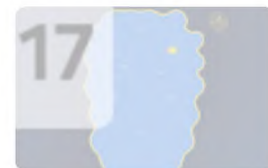
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produced the great religious authorities for centuries, serving as the intellectual and spiritual wellspring of the Shia world — a multi-national, multi-ethnic institution that built a deeply rooted jurisprudential school tending toward the relative separation of religion and political power.

Then came the Iranian Revolution, presenting Qom as a counterweight — driven by a clear political vision that directly linked religious authority to political power.

Over 47 years, Iran invested heavily in:

- Graduating clerics through its seminaries
- Attracting influential religious and media figures and surrounding them with generous patronage
- Building intellectual and social support networks across borders

And it succeeded in cementing a mental image presenting Iran as the natural cradle of Shia Islam and its rightful guardian.

Through this path, the center of gravity shifted — at least significantly — from Najaf to Qom, without meaningful resistance, through accumulated influence and institutional penetration.

This organic linkage created a deep psychological effect among many followers of the sect:

- Attacking Iran became attacking the Shia faith itself

- Criticizing its policies became a betrayal of "the Shia house"

This psychological barrier — built slowly and systematically — was not impenetrable. Many Shia and Shia scholars rejected it. Iran's own religious establishment experienced high-profile opposition from several authorities — perhaps most notably Grand Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, Khomeini's deputy who had been designated his successor, but was dismissed and placed under house arrest until his death in 2009 for insisting that the Guardianship of the Jurist has no foundation in Shia doctrine.

Contrary to what is promoted, the doctrine of Guardianship of the Jurist is not a matter of consensus even within these religious elites — but dissent came at a very high price, high enough to keep voices of protest muted, creating a painful duality between private and public opinion.

"Do You Want My Turban Removed?"

I witnessed it myself, more than once.

In a meeting with a turbaned Bahraini leader in exile, I was surprised by the extent of alignment between his views and mine — he was even sharper in his criticism at times. So I asked him simply:

"Why don't you say this publicly?"

He answered firmly: ***"Do you want my turban removed?"***

Only after hearing this phrase more than once, from more than one cleric, did I learn what is known in seminary tradition as "turban removal" — a procedure that effectively means the person is no longer considered fit to represent the religious institution or wear its dress.

When religious leaderships — those of great social weight and scholarly standing — refrain from voicing their convictions out of fear of their own patron institution, what courage can we demand from those below them in rank and far less protected?

The Silence of the Shia... Inability or Complicity?

In a 1967 behavioral experiment, a group of monkeys learned to prevent any member from climbing a ladder leading to bananas — through beating and trampling — because researchers had been spraying them all with cold water whenever one attempted to climb. The punishment stopped. The monkeys were gradually replaced. None of the original generation remained. But the rule persisted — enforced by those who had never felt the sting of cold water and never knew why the ladder was forbidden.

In 1951, the famous Asch experiment proved that 75% of humans will announce an answer they know with certainty is wrong when they see others affirming it.

The animal submits because it does not know.

The human submits while knowing.

And the difference between the two cases is exactly what we are
talking about:

Not an absence of awareness — but fear disguised as compliance.

The Scars of Memory of Rejection

In the 1990s, Bahrain lived through an extended uprising demanding
the restoration of a suspended parliament and a frozen constitution.

The current was not unified.

Scholar Sheikh Suleiman Al-Madani — a jurist trained at the Najaf
Hawza — chose the path of counsel and dialogue over confrontation,
and was followed by a significant constituency. But the price was
high:

The merchants who rallied around him faced economic boycotts. The
imams who adopted his discourse saw their congregations halved.

The anger of some young men at the time reached the point of
attacks on the homes and cars of his followers. Marriages never
happened — and others collapsed — due to political disagreements.

They were labeled appeasers, compromisers, and hypocrites.

That era officially ended, but it was transformed into a collective memory working in the shadows, shaping behavior without its bearers knowing why.

With the expansion of digital spaces, targeting campaigns became more effective — with the real instigator hiding behind layers of fake names. Here lies the danger: you do not know who is watching you, who is clipping your words out of context, who is turning people against you. Over time, society no longer needs to suppress you — because you gradually become your own censor.

The inescapable truth is that humans do not live by bread alone, but by the need for recognition and belonging. When a person is ostracized from their community and stripped of acceptance within their environment, they die standing — and many fear social death more than prison itself.

The Confusion of Identities

In this crisis, the Shia self became entangled with itself.

Most Bahraini Shia found themselves resentful of Iranian aggressions against their land and interests. Even within environments historically known for confronting authority, debates

erupted rejecting Iranian aggressions — but they never came out publicly.

Not from an absence of conviction — but because speaking out would be interpreted as an attack on the sect and an assault on its patron, an accusation no one wants to face alone.

They stood between the jaws of a vise:

A narrative planted in them over decades — that Iran is not a state like other states, but the Shia home, the encompassing embrace, the supreme reference. According to this narrative, the collapse of its regime is not the collapse of an oppressive government, but the collapse of the sect everywhere.

And on the other hand, social exclusion awaited anyone who voiced their opinion, branded a flatterer and opportunist.

The truth is self-evident: no sane person rejoices in the bombing of their own land. No one celebrates the collapse of an economy that sustains them, their neighbors, and the people of their neighborhood.

No one is pleased by schools closed to their children, or missiles targeting the factories and water desalination plants they drink from.

No one accepts their airports being targeted or their ships being hijacked.

Peoples — before governments — are those who pay the bill of destruction with their blood, their sustenance, and their lives.

When Slogans Narrowed... and the Homeland Widened

Returning to the beginning — let me tell you the result of my personal survey.

Whenever I asked:

"What if the United Nations gave you a choice today, in 2026, between Iranian guardianship and Al Khalifa?"

No matter how heated the debate, no matter how much the speaker seemed captivated by the "resistance" heroics or burdened by institutional loyalty — the answer always came, without exception:

"Al Khalifa... of course."

Because the human being, in moments of bare honesty, returns to their first instinct:

Gratitude for the home they belong to. And for the homeland that sheltered them under its wing, and was vast enough to hold their

fractures, their contradictions, and their dreams.

And that alone... is enough to understand everything.

****Lamis Dhaif****

Comment from Dhafer Al-Zayani Fans Platform:

****"Belated Awakening" — Acknowledging the Truth After Seeing the
Outlines of Iranian Failure****

"We place before you documentation of an important milestone in intellectual transformation, where these statements reflect the mindset of one who was once in the ranks of the opposition — only to return today and acknowledge the bitter truth we have sought to clarify for years: that alignment with the Iranian project is nothing but a dead end whose conclusion is destruction and regret.

This frank acknowledgment of the weakness of the expansionist project of the Guardianship of the Jurist, and the attempt to seek safety under the umbrella of the national leadership of Al Khalifa, proves that sovereignty and historical legitimacy are the only constant — while external wagers are pure illusion.

We document these transformations to confirm to future generations that Bahrain, with its leadership and its loyal people, remains always

the impregnable fortress – and that returning to the embrace of the homeland is the only path to salvation from the storms of destruction striking the region due to blind allegiance."













Lamis Dhaif

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